The Three Kingdoms of Ancient China: The History and

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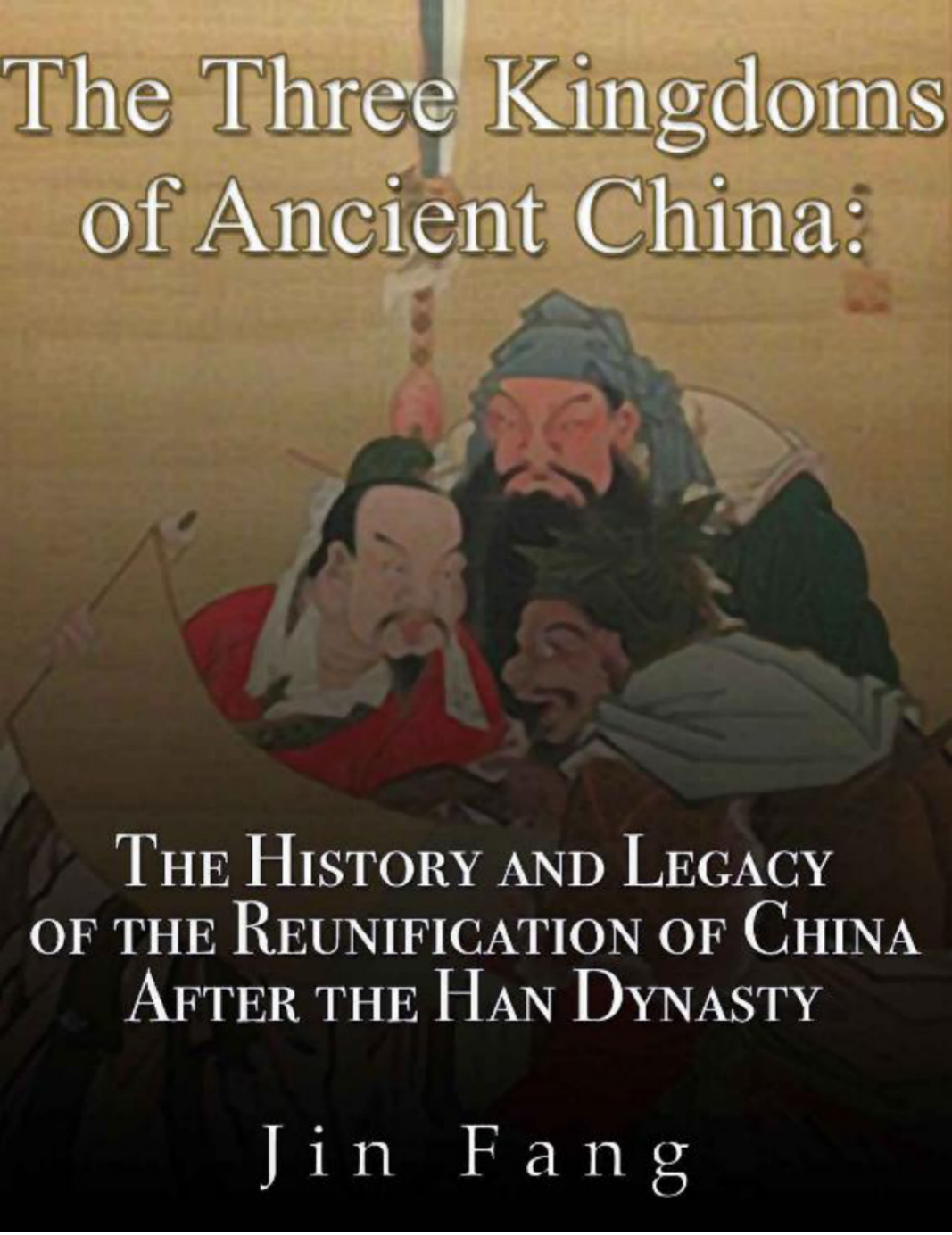

The History and Legacy of the Reunification of China After the Han Dynasty

Jin Fang

The Three Kingdoms of Ancient China: The History and Legacy of the Reunification of China after the Han Dynasty

Introduction

One of the most turbulent and romanticized eras in ancient Chinese history is that of *the three kingdoms* period. During the 3rd century A.D. in China, warlords battled for supremacy. This turbulent and bloody era is known as *the three kingdoms period.* It's also one of the most romanticized eras in Chinese history; heroes and villains like Cao Cao, Liu Bei, and Zhuge Liang have served has inspiration for poetry, novels, opera, and song in China. Perhaps the most celebrated is *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* by Luo Guanzhong, considered a masterpiece of Chinese literature.

In *The History of China's Three Kingdoms Period*, you'll learn about the events before and after the three kingdoms period, as well as its most famous characters.

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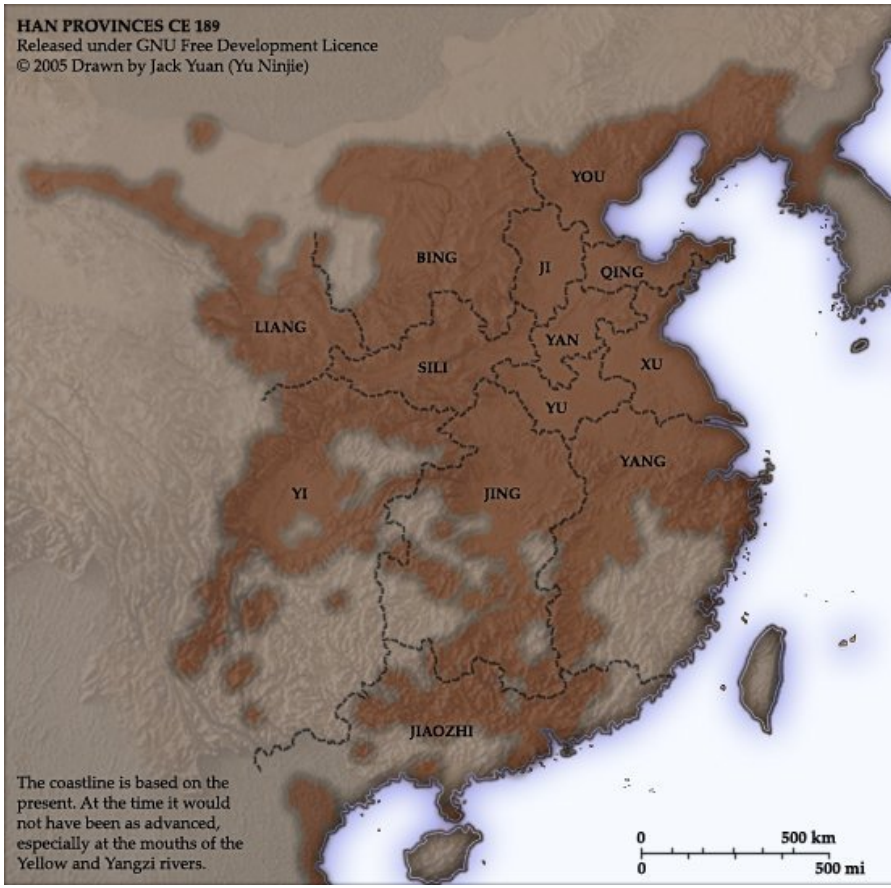
Orthography and Romanisation:

This essay uses Hanyu Pinyin when transliterating Chinese words. For more information on Hanyu Pinyin, the website www.pinyin.info is invaluable, as are the works by William Hannas, Yin Binyong and Mary Felley, detailed in the bibliography.

The chosen format for proper nouns is: Pinyin中文 English; and for other terms: *Pinyin*中文 English.

In Chinese, family names precede given names, and so considering Dong Zhuo, for example Dong is the family name and Zhuo the given name. Titles and honorifics follow the given name, but for convenience, and where appropriate have been rendered in English, preceding the name, leaving us with Emperor Ling, rather than Han Lingdi 汉灵帝, for example.

Courtly Warlords: The Rule of China During the Three Kingdoms Period



A map of Chinese provinces during the Three Kingdoms period

Tianming 天命 The Mandate of Heaven is a philosophical, political and legal concept that has guided Chinese political history since antiquity[1]. At its heart is the concept that China is unified under a single ruler, whose reign is authorised and validated by Tian 天 Heaven, a cosmic organising force quite dissimilar to the detached and absent firmament of classical European thought. The Mandate of Heaven enshrines the emperor of China as being supreme, unquestioned and universal ruler of his empire. His commands carry the weight of the divine, and the Mandate grants its bearer with absolute authority over China and its peoples, and any orders or edicts issued by that authority carry the weight of the same force that governs the waxing and waning of the moon, the ebb and flow of the tide and the changing of the seasons. Through his government, *Tianchao*天朝the Celestial Bureaucracy, he governs every aspect of life in his domain. The emperor is “more than human,[2]” and is a symbolic centre of both heaven and earth in China. Known as *huangdi* 皇帝 emperor, which conveys the concept of a deified ruler, or *tianzi*

天子 emperor, the literal son of heaven, and granted layers of titles and regnal names, with the characters comprising his/her name prior to accession taboo during his/her reign, linguistic as well as formal and conceptual boundaries separate the Emperor from even the most ennobled, established or powerful players in the kingdom.

In granting its bearer such celestially ordained power, The Mandate of Heaven is not entirely unlike the Divine Right of Kings enjoyed by European monarchs throughout the middle ages, and in some countries to this day. Like the Divine Right, the Mandate of Heaven grants great power to its bearer, a power transferable upon the death of the ruler to his (or her) rightful heir. Where it differs significantly, however, is the scope and scale of activity that the bearer of the Mandate of Heaven may indulge in. Heaven's mandate is extended only to those who act with righteousness and benevolence, and as such, the Mandate of Heaven has acted as a tool for social change and dynastic upheaval from its first invocation. From its earliest conception, justifying the rule of the Zhou Dynasty周朝 (c. 1025 – 453 BCE[3])[4], Heaven's disfavour could be made known to a ruler who was corrupt, decadent, or acted selfishly. In demonstrating to his conquered subjects that their previous ruler's inappropriate behaviour had brought Heaven's disfavour upon him, his own succession, and assurances that he now bore the Mandate of Heaven, the Duke of Zhou was able to establish the Zhou Dynasty, to which Confucian scholars throughout history would continue to regard as a golden age of righteous and benevolent rule. Natural disasters would follow a period of prosperity, growth and plenty; and popular dissent would mark that the ruler had lost Heaven's support. In the revolt that would follow, Heaven's mantle would be assumed by whoever proved victorious, immediately justifying their assumption of the throne. This dynastic cycle, of renewal under a new leader, prosperity and population boom, increasing corruption within the apparatus of state, popular rebellion, natural disasters, revolt and the ultimate installation of a new leader (who once again heralds a period of renewal) has proven extremely influential in Chinese political thought since the Warring States Period战国时代 (453 -221 BCE[5]).[6]

When we turn our attention to the period following the collapse of the Han Dynasty汉朝 (202 BCE-220 CE[7]), around 220 CE, we see the importance of a concept like the Mandate of Heaven in determining the ultimate outcome of the Imperial Court's inability to manage both the natural and man made disasters that ravaged the Empire. Critically, the Mandate of Heaven's proviso that China could only truly be ruled as a unified state under a single ruler could only aggravate the internecine warfare between the rulers of what would

come to be known as the Three Kingdoms. No one could be considered ruler of China until he had proven that he alone held Heaven's favour, which practically meant the destruction of those who likewise sought to demonstrate their suitability to bear Heaven's name.

The Rebellion of the Yellow Turbans and its aftermath

An ancient Chinese figurine depicting a foreign soldier

In the august years of the faltering Han Dynasty, a rebellion that would come to be known as the Yellow Turban Uprising swept across the land, and set the scene for the tripartition of China and the beginning of the period of chaos that would be known as the Three Kingdoms period. Primarily a religious uprising, the Yellow Turbans (named after the scarves they wore on their heads to identify themselves) shook the authority of the imperial court to its core. The rebellion would give military commanders unprecedented power, and in the devastation which lasted many years after the official defeat of the rebels, many wealthy landholders and provincial officials would take *de facto* rule over their territories, further contributing to the collapse of the once great Han Dynasty.

The Yellow Turban Rebellion began as a popular movement in 184CE[8]. A great many peasants, serfs and other disaffected members of society railed against what they perceived as ineffective and corrupt government, and exploitation at the hands of the wealthy landlords

and bureaucrats, on whom they depended not only for food, which was distributed at the discretion of the officials, but also for protection against the armed gangs that roamed the country at the time. The efforts of the faltering dynasty to contain and crush these criminal pockets, and indeed to expel raiders from the nomadic tribes such as the Xianbei 鲜卑 to the north created a very real tax burden on the already beleaguered peasantry, who had suffered a series of poor harvests in the years leading up to the rebellion. One such effort to stamp out Xianbei incursions in 177CE resulted in total failure, as an entire military expedition was destroyed by the more resilient tribe people. Further adding to the difficulties of the peasantry, flooding was recorded in contemporary histories during the harvest season of 183CE. In a world view that holds that natural disasters such as flooding, and humiliating defeat at the hands of uncivilised barbarians are in themselves portentous events that herald social upheaval, and hint at a coming renewal, it is not difficult to see the appeal of a messianic movement, such as the Yellow Turbans provided.

Beginning in modern Hebei 河北 province, the Yellow Turbans were in effect a personality cult that grew up around 3 faith healers, the brothers Zhang Bao 张宝, Zhang Liang张梁 and Zhang Jue 张角 (also known as Zhang Jiao). The three brothers Zhang, with the eldest brother Jue at their head, claimed lineage from Zhang Daoling 张道陵, a psuedo-legendary character: a Taoist priest and thaumaturgist, granted stewardship over LonghuShan龙虎山 *Dragon Tiger Mountain* and founder of the cult of the Celestial Masters.[9]

The Three Brothers: Liu Bei (left), Guan Yu (center), Zhang Fei (right). From an edition of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

Drawing on this lineage, the brothers Zhang travelled far and wide, administering potions to cure the sick, performing exorcisms, communing with the spirits, and so on, and in so doing establishing vast personal networks that flew in the face of the traditional organisation of society into self-monitoring family groups. Baojia 保家 *grouped families*, was a system of social control designed to prevent the fomenting of dissent, and encouraged family groups, arbitrarily

lumped together to watch one another closely, as a system of collective responsibility was enforced, meaning a transgression from one member of a Baojia group would result in every other member of that group being punished. By being free from this system of grouping, the Zhang brothers had unprecedented abilities to travel, meet new people, and attach the grateful recipients of their cures and incantations to their nominally growing group.

The Yellow Turbans proved a surprisingly organised force. By the time of the rebellion, in 184, the movement had around 360000 followers.[10] As the Zhang brothers travelled, they spread their message about the corruption of the state, and their dreams of an egalitarian future, in which power could be placed in the hands of the poor, and in which wealth would be taken from the hands of the land's ineffective rulers to care for the weak and needy. Given that the Zhangs' audiences were primarily the weak and needy (or at least those in need of medicine), it is unsurprising that these 3 brothers were able to prove themselves persuasive. The Zhangs were able to establish an organised theocratic state, in which a hierarchy of religious officials governed everything from the civic, to the ecclesiastical and military. The Yellow Turbans became not only a common cause devoted to collective well being, but an organised church and a military threat to the reigning Han. In the year preceding the rebellion proper, the Yellow Turban movement had spread across North Eastern China, through modern Hebei, Henan河南, Shandong山东, Anhui安徽, Jiangsu江苏 and Zhejiang浙江. Despite warnings from within the court, and the advice of his eunuchs to disband the Yellow Turbans, Emperor Ling did not pre-empt the uprising, and Zhang Jue was able to begin to realise, in part, his ambitions.

The rebellion began in the second month of 184. Zhang Jue had planned a popular uprising, and to establish his Taiping Guo太平国 Kingdom of Great Peace in place of the unpopular and ineffective Han. Conspirators lurked in the imperial court, and other rebellions fomented across the country. The unexpected arrest and execution of a number of key players acting within the imperial machinery stirred Emperor Ling to declare the Yellow Turbans anathema, and order their immediate destruction. Zhang Jue was forced to begin his attempted conquest early. A decree written by Zhang Jue that year declared the fall of the Han and the establishment of a Yellow Kingdom, which stirred his followers into action. The initial rebellion, led by Zhang Jue and his two brothers broke out in the region north of the Yellow River. A secondary rebellion manifested in You 幽 province, near modern Beijing. Simultaneously, rebels rose up around

the imperial capital at Luoyang洛阳, in modern Henan province. It was government infrastructure and individuals representing state authority that became the first targets for the rebelling serfs. Officials, bureaucrats, magistrates and their offices were immediate initial victim of the rebel forces, as were the holdings of wealthy landlords. [11]

The government's reaction, in the early stage of the rebellion was decidedly back-footed. Caught off-guard and by surprise, the emperor's primary concern was the defence of the capital, and the execution of those at the heart of the rebellion. The emperor's brother-in-law, He Jin何进 was appointed commander of the imperial forces charged with destroying the rebels threatening Luoyang. After three months, the rebellion in the capital had been crushed, and the Emperor commissioned a number of generals to put down what remained of the Yellow Turbans. He Jin, the emperor's brother-in-law was granted control over the imperial armies, and would soon be ennobled for his service to the throne. Met with troops from the battle-hardened garrisons of Liang凉 Province (modern Gansu甘肃), many of whom were seasoned veterans from dealing with incursions from the non-Chinese Qiang 羌people, and the tactical skill of the imperial military; the Yellow Turbans were met with early defeat. Before the end of 184, all 3 Zhang brothers had been killed in battle and their followers began to dissipate without the strong leadership that the triumvirate of the Zhangs had provided. Despite resurgent uprisings that persisted from the official end of the rebellion (185) until 205, the Yellow Turbans were broken, and their movement essentially over.

Despite the proclamation by Emperor Ling in 185 that pacification had been achieved, the rebellion had left much of the Kingdom in ruins. The early targets of the rebels' wrath had been the dynastic officials and local governors who were now a missing cog in the machinery of Han power. Vast swathes of the country were now beyond central control, as the bureaucrats who channelled imperial authority into the provinces were long dead. Further to the missing apparatus of state, many hundreds of thousands of people had died or been displaced in the chaos of the rebellion leaving farmland untended as crops rotted in the fields. The economy of the empire was devastated, and very little could be done by central authorities to address the problems. Those local governors who had outlasted the rebels, along with the military commanders who had been charged with crushing the Yellow Turbans both gained enormous powers of self-governance, hastening the collapse of the Han. Faced with a lack of government, extended families drew together for mutual protection,

both against the remnants of the Yellow Turbans, but also against the armed gangs of bandits and looters to whom the chaos of the rebellion's aftermath, and the void where once an effective militia-force stood, proved a world of opportunities for wealth and power.

Among those who rose to prominence in the twilight years of the Han are the likes of Cao Cao 曹操, Dong Zhuo 董卓, Lu Zhi 卢植, Zhu Jun朱俊 and HuangfuSong皇甫嵩, all characters who would later play prominent roles in the Three Kingdoms period, with which this essay is chiefly concerned.

Cao Cao, from an edition of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

The combination of faltered imperial response to the rebellion and preceding disasters might in themselves be considered a demonstration of the Mandate of Heaven slipping from the shoulders of the Han rulers. Considering the appreciation even in early imperial China for the notion of dynastic cyclicism, and the quantifiable way in which a dynasty's progress through its cycle can be measured, we are able to look at the end of the Han dynasty as just that, its years of decline. The decline of the dynasty, evidenced by the natural disasters, rebellion and subsequent anarchy indicates the shifting of heaven's favour, even if its new recipient is not yet apparent.

Dong Zhuo's interregnum

In 189, Emperor Ling died, and the country was thrown deeper into plight as a war of succession erupted, with He Jin, who had been made commander-in-chief of the imperial armies struggling to reclaim power from the eunuchs, who had amassed fortunes for themselves and wielded vast power even before the emperor's death. Perhaps in an act of foresight, the eunuchs had advised the emperor to commission a second army, which upon his death fell into the control of the eunuchs, cementing the position of the Eunuch Faction as a force of power that could not simply be ignored. He was able to wrest control of their army from the eunuchs after an assassination plot against him was thwarted. While the succession issue was settled in favour of He Jin's nephew, and the military threat posed by the eunuchs neutralised, they still held remarkable influence over He Jin's sister, the Empress Dowager. The Empress Dowager had previously resisted her brother's attempts to crush the eunuchs, principally on the grounds that with no eunuch presence, the Empress would be forced to interact with men who hadn't undergone castration. While trying to persuade his sister to deal with the ambitious eunuchs, He Jin was ambushed in the palace by the *castrati,* who murdered him in the palace gardens. Unbeknownst to them, He's forces, led by Yuan Shao 袁绍 waited outside the palace, and as the severed head of their leader was unceremoniously tossed from the palace wall, Yuan led his troops to assault the palace, and slaughter the eunuchs. Over 2000 eunuchs and their allies were massacred as the palace burned, and in the chaos the young Emperor Shao 少帝 was rescued by Dong Zhuo, one of the frontier generals loyal (initially) to He Jin.[12]

Cao Cao presenting a blade to Dong Zhuo, from an edition of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

Dong Zhuo's army had been brought from the wilderness, and relieved of its duty to protect the southern frontier from Qiang attack. His troops had been instrumental in defeating the Yellow Turbans, and had been summoned to the capital by He Jin before his assassination. With the death of HeJin, and the subsequent death of his brother He Miao何苗 (who was either killed by Yuan Shao for collusion, or executed by his own troops; overzealous in their vigilance against those suspected of being in the pocket of the eunuchs), Dong Zhuo was able to provide leadership to their fracturing forces, and in so doing unite a formidable force under his own aegis. Dong led his new army to intercept the fleeing eunuchs who had abducted the infant Emperor Shao. Returning with his soldiers to Luoyang, Dong was quickly able to depose Emperor Shao, having him poisoned in 190, aged 13 or 14. The deposed emperor's younger brother was selected by Dong Zhuoas the successor to the imperial throne. Younger even than his brother, and without the influence of the eunuchs to contend with, Dong acted as regent in the stead of Emperor Xian獻帝, who was eight years old when he was placed on the throne. Dong Zhuo was not accused of being discreet in exercising his power over the court and

the young emperor. The Histories of the Wei describe him as having born his sword to court, and not removing his footwear in the palace. He was a cruel despot, whose troops terrorised the populace under the premise of seeking out dissidents and rebels.

Dong's indiscretions, brutality and apparent disrespect for the office of the Emperor prompted a broad coalition of Han loyalists, parochial warlords, disenfranchised ministers and ousted military commanders to begin aligning themselves against Dong's power base. Letters were circulated among the regional commanders, accusing Dong of treason, and soon, forces were mobilised under the banners of Yuan Shu 袁术 and Zhang Miao张邈 , which came to include the veteran forces of Cao Cao, Sun Jian and Yuan Shao. The coalition laid siege to Luoyang, blocking off trade to the city from the east, which prompted Dong to mint new coinage, which caused economic instability across the western empire.

Alarmed at the forces arranged against him, Dong ordered the city be abandoned, razed to the ground and the population force marched to the more easily defendable position of Chang'an 长安 (modern Xi'an 西安), a journey of around 400km. Dong's forces also raided the tombs of the Han emperors, as well as the homes of the wealthy evacuees now being marched from Luoyang with their families, neighbours and the infant Emperor Xian. Dong was able to stabilise his power base in the new capital at Chang'an. A combination of effective psychological tactics successfully demoralised the coalition forces arrayed against him, which included the promise of horrific punishments for any prisoners of war his own forces captured. Dong's reputation of cruelty grew as reports of the lavish, decadent and utterly depraved spectacles unveiled at his banquets spread. He would dismember his opponents as entertainment for his often horrified guests, and would literally deep fry the live, screaming bodies of those suspected of treason to Dong Zhuo, or merely those who had fallen from their master's favour. Ultimately, Dong Zhuo's tyranny cost him his life. His decadence had bankrupted most of the fracturing kingdom and his displays of largess and cruelty had irked even those closest to him. It was LüBu吕布, Dong Zhuo's adopted son, bodyguard and most trusted general who dealt the killing blow, after ambushing him outside the palace with a cadre of cavalry officers in 192. Unsurprisingly, Dong was not much lamented by his subjects, who faced the death penalty themselves for interfering with Dong's slowly burning, fat smothered body as it hung from the battlements of his greatest display of hubris, the citadel at the heart of Chang'an.

The government hastily assembled in the wake of Dong's violent decline offered no respite for former allies and supporters of Dong

Zhuo. Wang Yun 王允, former minister under Dong Zhuo had been instrumental in agitating Lü Bu into action against his mentor, and now headed the government, following what amounted to a coup. Facing arrest and the grim prospect of execution should they remain in Chang'an, the Liang province soldiers who had implemented Dong Zhuo's despotic reign amassed under Li Jue 李傕and GuoSi郭汜, two of Dong's closest aides and two of the four former generals who were not granted amnesty by Wang Yun's new government. The forces arranged under these two generals ballooned, and they were able to lay siege to the city within just ten days of Dong Zhuo's overthrow. The precise details are difficult to ascertain, with sources conflicted over the downfall of Wang Yun. Some sources, including a romantic passage from the seminal Romance of the Three Kingdoms suggest that upon hearing the besieging forces craved only his blood, Wang Yun killed himself, hoping to spare the people of Chang'an, and the refugees from Luoyang even more hardship. Other sources insist that Wang refused to surrender himself to Guo Si and Li Jue, and was executed in a public square along with his entire family as soon as the generals took Chang'an. Regardless, Guo and Li sacked the city once again, and became the *de facto* regents of China as they held the young emperor and his officials captive.

Dong Zhuo's assassination of the young Emperor Shao marks for some the beginning of the Three Kingdoms period proper, in 189. Others prefer the year 190, in which Luoyang was emptied and Chang'an established as Dong's operating base. The earliest date for the beginning of the period is generally given as 184, the year of the Yellow Turban Uprising, or the year of its defeat, 185.[13] These dates are rather arbitrary. It's far safer to conclude simply that the end of the Han Dynasty was a period of great upheaval, which continued through until the establishment of the Jin dynasty and the conclusion of the period of tripartition in China known as the Three Kingdoms.

The Three Kingdoms

Much like Dong Zhuo had done, Li Jue sought to control the emperor through force and intimidation. With his forces garrisoning the citadel in Chang'an, the court were very much prisoners of Li and Guo. Tensions between the two grew following their defeat of a force raised against them in an attempt to remove them from the regency. Their followers likewise turned on one another, and the city itself was wracked with daily bloodshed as gangs loyal to one side or the other sought out their opponents in the city's temples and marketplaces. Their antipathy climaxed during a banquet, in which a drunk Guo Si became convince that Li had attempted to poison him. Guo Si took the

entire imperial court hostage while Li kept the emperor as his prisoner. The chaos made life in Chang'an all but impossible, forcing the emperor to beg his courtiers to broker a truce between the two regents. Neither Li nor Guo had ambitions beyond their own aggrandisement, a policy which further hastened the demise of the crumbling Han state, still reeling from the devastation wrought by the Yellow Turban Rebellion and the civil war the ensued following Dong Zhuo's rise to power. A short peace was indeed arranged during which the young emperor managed to convince his captors to allow him to restore his court at Luoyang. Guo and Li agreed to the emperor's request, and he left Chang'an towards the ruins of Luoyang. The two regents immediately reneged on their decision, and sent troops out to recapture the emperor, who managed to elude them. The imperial court arrived at Luoyang in 195 finding the city in ruins, as it had been left by Dong Zhuo's forces as they beat their retreat and scorched the earth in their flight. Many of the courtiers starved, and the emperor found himself in a precarious position: being forced to surrender himself once more to the captivity of Li and Guo.

Emperor Xian (center), from an edition of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

Ultimately, another option presented itself to Emperor Xian. Cao Cao, a general under Emperor Ling and an official responsible for early action against the Yellow Turbans. He had been a key ally of Yuan Shao's in the campaign against Dong Zhuo, and had since established himself as a minor warlord in Xuchang 许昌, modern Henan. Cao invited Emperor Xian to establish his court at Xuchang, and declare it the new capital. The emperor agreed, ennobled Cao Cao and accepted his protection and new position as commander-in-chief. Cao Cao was the adopted son of a eunuch, and had no ties to the hereditary aristocracy of late Han China. Cao's unification of Xuchang and China's northern reaches occurred well before the final dissolution of the Han Empire. His main rival to the north was Yuan Shao, his

former ally against Dong Zhuo.

Yuan Shao's ambition was apparent in his declining a number of titles offered by the emperor. Accepting these titles would have amounted to accepting the emperor's authority to grant them, and accepting Cao Cao's stewardship of the imperial court in Xuchang. From around 196, it became apparent that an armed struggle for control over the northern reaches of would take place, with Cao Cao and Yuan Shao the two main belligerents. Yuan Shao had not acted against Cao Cao until the latter's move to seize the imperial court. By then, however Cao had enacted a number of military reforms, which left him in command of largely professional soldiers, motivated to fight not just but sense of duty and coercion, but promise of material reward. In 200, Liu Bei 刘备, a descendent of Emperor Ling and a key ally of both Cao Cao and Emperor Xian rebelled against Cao Cao's command from Xuchang, and Cao was required to divert forces from his northern border to contain Liu Bei's treachery. Yuan Shao took this opportunity to begin his assault on Cao's territories, and declared war on Cao following Liu Bei's defeat. (Liu Bei was not killed by Cao's forces, and escaped north to Yuan Shao's protection.)

Liu Bei

Yuan Shao and Cao Cao met at Guandu 官渡 in the autumn of 200, in a battle that proved decisive in the development of the Three Kingdoms for a number of reasons. Yuan Shao boasted a numerically superior force, some 110000 soldiers to Cao Cao's 40000, and ignored advice from his generals to moderate his attack, keeping troops in reserve or splitting his forces to force Cao's hand. Cao had the advantage of defending a fortified position. As the armies met, they quickly became clogged in a battle of attrition, with both sides entrenching themselves and deploying siege weapons against the

other. Both armies became weary of the melee, and supplies began to dwindle on both sides. Cao Cao, bolstered by defectors from Yuan's army raided Yuan's forward supply base, slaughtering the garrison there and making off with the supplies for himself. Morale in Yuan's army dwindled as the troops went hungry. Three of Yuan's generals failed in a renewed assault upon Cao's position, and surrendered their arms to him. Cao launched a full assault upon his demoralised foe, and thoroughly routed them. Yuan Shao escaped with around 800 cavalry, all that survived of his army.

Sun Quan, from an edition of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

Cao Cao's southward expansion was hampered by his defeat at the Battle of Red Cliffs, which like the Battle of Guandu, is a greatly romanticised episode in Chinese history. Cao Cao's forces were met by an alliance of Sun Quan 孙权 and Liu Bei, who had previously evaded capture by Cao Cao. Liu Bei had allied with Sun Quan following the defeat of Yuan Shao by Cao Cao, and was accompanied by his adviser and martial strategist ZhugeLiang诸葛亮.

Zhuge Liang, one of the most famous Chinese military strategists of all time. One of his many inventions was the repeating crossbow.

The victor of the Battle of Red Cliffs would have decisive control over the Yangzi Jiang扬子江 Yangtze River, and in Cao Cao's case would enable him to conquer the southern territories of Wu, controlled at present by Sun Quan. Cao's army was bolstered by troops recently defected from Sun's former allies, and probably consisted of around 220000 soldiers, including many newly pressed levy men. Cao Cao's long marches had taken their toll on his armies, with morale said to be low and disease and malnutrition likewise rife among the

troops. The allied forces of Sun Quan and Liu Bei, by comparison consisted of around 80000, with many seasoned marines among the ranks. Cao's vanguard forces were defeated in a series of small skirmishes that prohibited them from claiming a numerical advantage against the allied forces. Cao's forces retreated both north and south, leaving them divided for the allies' subsequent attacks.[14] The allies deployed a number of fire ships (large ships packed with kindling and oil, set ablaze and abandoned once in position), and sailed them upstream towards a blockade of manned ships prepared by Cao, anticipating a traditional naval attack, in which marines would attempt to board and capture one ship from another. Cao's troops were mostly northern conscripts, with little experience (or appetite) for naval engagements. The fire ships sank many of Cao's moored vessels, and the confused and beleaguered remnants of his defending force were easily defeated by the well trained and disciplined troops of the allies.[15] Seeing his northern forces in disarray, Cao Cao ordered a general retreat. Heavy rain had made Cao's escape route little more than a treacherous quagmire, and his sick troops struggled through the mud, many lost to the swap as they attempted to help horses and supplies traverse the marshland. The allied army pursued them from the water, harassing their fleeing enemy, and decimating them as they fled. Cao Cao himself was able to flee further north. His army was in ruins, however, as those among his troops who were not killed by Liu and Sun's alliance were able to desert in the chaos following the battle.

Zhuge Liang and Cao Cao are just two of the heroic characters that arose in and during the prelude to the Three Kingdoms period who have been absorbed into Chinese popular and literary culture through history and down to the day. While the Romance of the Three Kingdoms is perhaps the most significant, the influence of the period of history can be found in the modern vernacular Chinese language. Cao Cao's brilliance has enshrined him in the expression *shuo Cao Cao, Cao Cao jiu dao* 说曹操，曹操就到 say Cao Cao and Cao Cao arrives, with the meaning of “talk of the Devil and he shall appear.” A number of Zhuge Liang's stratagems have likewise found themselves part of contemporary Chinese vernacular. A fictitious account in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, for example, of Zhuge Liang's defence of Xicheng 西城 from SimaYi司马懿 is now used in modern Chinese to allude to a double bluff. *Kong cheng ji* 空城计 the empty city strategy, refers to Zhuge Liang's alleged defence by opening the gates and concealing his army while playing his zither to the approaching army of Sima Yi. Baffled, and wary of a trick, Sima Yi ordered the retreat of his forces, and Zhuge Liang averted a battle in which his forces would have been massacred.

By 219 Cao Cao had taken what would become known as the State of Wei under Cao Cao's heir, and made it his own, styled as King of Wei by 216. The Wei state, under Cao Cao operated under a strict legalist mandate, with a highly organised authoritarian bureaucracy. The route to officialdom in Wei was modelled on earlier examination systems, restoring the ruling class of literati elite which had been in decline since the eruption of the Yellow Turbans so many years before. Under Cao Cao, the state of Wei produced a codified penal system, with 2926 articles; the nation's agricultural base was strengthened, with dispossessed peasants granted tenancy over wasteland, which they were to cultivate. Cao Cao also pioneered the establishment of military colonies around these agricultural bases, granting land and titles to those who became professional soldiers, and providing serfs to work the land. Intermarriage was encouraged among the soldierly class, as was the integration of non-Chinese ethnicities, such as the Qiang and Xianbei into Chinese society. While these arrangements were not ideal, with land tenants required to submit up to 60% of their produce as tax, most were content to be active and safe in their labour for the first time in a great many years.

Cao Cao died in the spring of 220, leaving his kingdom to his son, Cao Pi. Cao Pi, not satisfied with a mere kingly title, forced Emperor Xian's abdication, and had himself proclaimed Emperor Wenof Wei魏文帝, and posthumously titled his father Emperor Wu of Wei魏武帝. Liu Bei saw the abdication of Emperor Xian, the last of the Han as an opportunity for the restoration of the Han under himself. As a descendant of Emperor Ling, he proclaimed that he was Emperor Zhaolie of Shu-Han蜀汉照烈帝. Cao Pi and Liu Bei's ascent to their thrones prompted Sun Quan to respond in kind, and when Sun was required to submit his son as hostage to the Wei emperor, he declined and responded by declaring himself Emperor Daof Wu吴大帝 in 229. Wei, Wu and Shu-Han, the Three Kingdoms were at last cemented.

Cao Pi, from an edition of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

The establishment, formally of three rival kingdoms, each boasting its own government, military and structured civil service did not bring peace or stability to China. Each of the three rulers, Emperors Wu, Zhaolie and Da viewed themselves as legitimate emperors of China whole, with their rivals mere pretenders who sought to usurp their thrones. Under the Mandate of Heaven, China can only have one ruler, and the Mandate favours the ruler who brings stability and prosperity to China after a period of decline and ruin. Emperor Wu's claim to the throne stemmed from the order given by his predecessor, Emperor Xian, whose abdication in favour of Emperor Wu should stand alone as an imperial decree, which itself is the will of Heaven. Emperor Zhaolie claimed descent from Emperor Ling, perhaps the last Han emperor who held any real power, and perhaps then the last true bearer of the Mandate of Heaven. Emperor Da's pretension to the

throne rose out of his refusal of an order given by Emperor Wu, and in so refusing Cao Pi, was able to claim that Heaven favoured him, and ascended to the throne out of his own power.

A period of intermittent fighting and consolidation followed the establishment of the three states. Wei continued after Cao Cao's model, of a strong central government with a well organised state bureaucracy and a strong and expanding military. The state of Wu was similarly modelled, with legalist advisers to the Emperor and his court, an examination system to test would be officials and a strong agrarian economy. The state of Shu-Han was organised somewhat differently, and clans of hereditary aristocrats with family histories cemented in the earlier Han dynasty forming a federation of powerful clans swearing fealty to Emperor Zhaolie. Court officials were almost exclusively drawn from these ruling families, creating a strong feudal base for the emergent state. Following Emperor Zhaolie's self-coronation as Emperor of the Shu-Han, his chancellor and military adviser urged the unification of China under a restored Han dynasty. Zhuge Liang negotiated a truce with Sun Quan and the Wu state to the east, and led a series of invasions against the Wei to the north, with the aim of overthrowing Cao Cao's descendants and taking the North China Plain into Shu-Han.

Cao Cao's legacy, inherited by his son and grandsons was eventually usurped by one of the elite families that had been able to invest a great deal of state power in itself. The Sima 司马 clan in particular, among whom Sima Yi was counted came to wield Cao Cao's descendants in the same way Cao Cao himself had wielded the last emperor of the Han.

Sima Yi, from an edition of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

The Simas demonstrated their relative autonomy from as early as the first of Zhuge Liang's northern invasions in 228. Zhuge planned a rebellion to coincide with an invading force led by Zhuge's generals and small armies of elite soldiers, with the aim of taking Chang'an, the former capital under Dong Zhuo. Sima Yi forewent the formality of seeking court approval for military action, and personally attacked Zhuge Liang's forces sent to reinforce the rebellion, and to crush both agitators and insurgents. Zhuge Liang's four subsequent attempts to conquer the state of Wei likewise met with failure, until he died in 234. Arguably, were it not for Zhuge Liang's consistent failure to conquer Wei, the Sima clan would not have achieved the prominence they eventually came to enjoy. Sima Yi and Zhuge Liang's strategic

rivalry provide some of the finest extant anecdotes relating to the period. The in the Battle of Red Cliffs, for example, it is alleged in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, that one of Sun Quan'sgenerals, Zhou Yu周瑜 challenged Zhuge to produce 100,000 arrows in ten days, or face execution for dereliction of duty. Zhuge prepared a number of boats and filled them with straw figures. Setting the boats on a course towards the enemy encampment one foggy morning, Cao Cao's forces suspected foul play, and taking no chances launched volley upon volley of arrows at the straw men in the boats. It was then a simple matter for Zhuge to pull the boats back to friendly waters, collect the arrows and present them to the jealous, and by now fuming Zhou Yu. Zhuge Liang's death on one of his Northern campaigns was kept a close secret by the generals surrounding him. As the Shu-Han forces began a tentative retreat from a stand off with the numerically superior Wei army, Sima Yi (who had learned of Zhuge's ill health after questioning an emissary) suspected that his rival had died in camp. Sima ordered his army to advance, and to harass and destroy the retreating Shu-Han. As his vanguard began to engage with the withdrawing Shu-Han, the entire Shu-Han army doubled back on itself and began a full scale attack on the advancing Wei. Convinced that he had been outwitted by Zhuge, who must have faked his death, Sima Yi ordered his army to fall back, and thus the Shu-Han force was able to flee to friendly territories with minimal casualties, despite the death of their leader, Zhuge Liang.

Under the Sima clan, the Wei state was geared towards an unpopular mission of conquest over the neighbouring Shu-Han. The influence of the Simas over the Wei emperor's courtiers was able to win the non-committal officials over, and the invasion was planned. The Simas were able to convince the court that a unified China under the Wei would prove that the Mandate of Heaven had been granted to the Wei (and their *de facto* heads of state in the Sima clan, potentially eliminating any argument or armed struggle over the succession to the Wei throne.) Yet another extant Chinese idiom translates the efforts of Sima Zhao司馬昭 in securing his family's ascendency to the Wei, and later the Chinese imperial throne: *Sima Zhao zhi xin, lu ren jie zhi*司馬昭之心,路人皆知 everyone in the street knows what's on Sima Zhao's mind: an expression that expresses that one's secret objectives are so widely suspected that they're no longer really a secret. The prospect of Wei absorbing Shu-Han led the Wu court to dispatch its armies to harass Wei's frontiers after its armies had been redeployed to prepare for the invasion. Wu hoped that Wei would redirect at least some of its forces to defend its exposed flanks, and in so doing thin the ranks of its invading army. Wu's gambit failed, the Wei court doubted that the Wu had managed to muster an army capable of truly threatening

the state of Wei without its knowledge, and maintained its focus on the invasion of Shu-Han. In all, around 180,000 troops participated in the conquest of ShuHan, which culminated in the surrender of the troops defending the capital Chengdu成都 and the further surrender of the Shu Han imperial seal to Wei, formally ceding Shu-Han's defeat, and the victory of the Wei emperors.

SimaZhao's ambition was not realised in his lifetime. He died in 260, shortly after overthrowing an attempt by the then emperor, Cao Mao 曹髦 and those loyal to him to oust the Sima clan from court and restore power to the rightful emperors of the Wei, the descendants of Cao Cao. Sima Zhao was succeeded by his son, SimaYan司马炎, who was far less temperate than his father, and certainly not willing to exercise patience in realising his family's long sought-after ascent to power. In a case of history repeating itself, Yan deposed the 19 year old Cao Huan 曹奐 in 264, forcing him to abdicate and enthrone Yan, just as Cao Pi had done with Emperor Xian in 220. The last emperor of the Wei gone, SimaYan became Emperor Wu武帝 of the Jin晋 dynasty.

The decline of the state of Wu followed the rise of Sima Yan as Emperor Wu. The Wu state had been devastated by popular revolt against the emperors succeeding Sun Quan, marring the country with the same problems that had beset China since the aftermath of the Yellow Turban revolt. The emperors of Wu instated despotic reigns in which popular dissent was brutally oppressed, while military commanders were able to amass their own power bases and lead their troops in attempts to overthrow the ruling dynasty and establish their own kingdoms. In light of this, Wu made little attempt to raise its defences against the risen Jin Dynasty. Even when faced with evidence that Jin forces were amassing, and an invasion fleet was under construction, the Wu emperor did not act to strengthen the kingdom's position. Furthermore, the untimely death of the country's commander-in-chief led to command of the armed forces being split five ways and inherited by the sons of the deceased general.

When the Jin attack eventually came, the armies of Wu were thinly spread along the length of the Yangzi River, allowing Jin generals to minimise their numerical disadvantage by attacking the overextended Wu battle line where most it suited them. Dispersed, divided and demoralised, Wu's forces were unable to respond to the concentrated efforts of the attacking Jin armies. While a number of generals made spirited attempts to defend their positions along the Yangzi, and even launched counter attacks. In just 2 months, the Jin armies pushed south from their launching grounds established on the banks of the Yangzi, and prepared for a final siege of the Wu capital, Jianye 建邺, modern Nanjing南京. The last stand of Wu was intended to take place

just beyond the capital's walls, but the vast majority of the 20,000 troops who had been gathered deserted on the eve of the battle. Leaving the last Wu emperor Sun Hao 孙皓 no choice but to issue his final edict: that his followers faithfully serve the Jin dynasty before surrendering to the Jin army, and being spirited away to Luoyang, a prisoner of war.

The unification of China under the Jin heralded the end of the Three Kingdoms period in 280. The stability brought about by the Sima clan as the emperors of the Jin Dynasty led to a fecund period of literary and material culture in China, in which in particular ceramic technology was developed to a high degree, resulting in the pale greenish-blue celadon ware, of which many fine examples still exist. In spite of the great tumult in the almost hundred year period between the eruption of the Yellow Turban Rebellion, the cruel tyranny of the latter Han under Dong Zhuo, the rise of the warlords and the sacking of Luoyang, the establishment and subsequent destruction of the Wei, Shu-Han and Wu and the rise of the Jin, the period fuels the imagination of contemporary China as it has throughout history, culminating in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, written during the Ming明 dynasty (1368-1644). In the twentieth century, one could take on the role of key characters from the period, and re-enact their exploits in Koei's Dynasty Warriors series of computer games, in which the romanticism and hyperbole of earlier fiction culminates in (for example) Zhuge Liang firing beams of light from a feather fan, and Sima Yi dancing through enemy lines with vicious claws. The Three Kingdoms period has, and continues to capture the imaginations of China, and also sparks a curiosity among wider audiences as to the events that unfolded during the cleaving of Roman Empire in twain.

Throughout the period, the issue surrounding the Mandate of Heaven was manifest. The faltering reign of Emperor Ling, and the rise of the Yellow Turbans, signalled that the Han had lost its divine right to rule. Dong Zhuo's challenge to the rightful emperors Shao and Xian proved such an egregious front to the principal of the Mandate, that it galvanised a disparate band of rival warlords to organise and overthrow the tyrant Dong. Following Dong Zhuo's defeat and the rise of the warlords Cao Cao, Sun Quan and Liu Bei, the success of each warlord proved sufficient to each of them to consider themselves blessed by Heaven, and worthy of bearing its mandate. When each refused to bow to either of the others, the proviso that only one may bear the Mandate of Heaven and rule a unified China drove the Three Kingdoms to further conflict with one another, each one certain that victory would legitimise their conquest of their neighbours, just as the Duke of Zhou had explained his right to rule over the conquered.

Without the Mandate of Heaven, the Sima clan could never have become an imperial family, but their manoeuvring and seizure of power itself legitimised their claim to the throne of Wei, ready to be refashioned after themselves as the state of Jin.

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[1] Opinions are divided over whether the Duke of Zhou 周 first invoked the Mandate of Heaven in justifying the overthrow of the Shang 商 Kings, or whether

the concept was devised later by Confucian scholar Mengzi 孟子 Mencius.

[2] Jonathan Spence, *Emperor of China: Self Portrait of K'ang-Hsi.* (London: Pimlico, 1992) xii

[3] Jaques Gernet, trans. By J. R. Foster and C. Hartman, *A History of Chinese Civilisation.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 688-690

[4] Elizabeth Perry, Challenging the Mandate of Heaven: Social Protest and State Power in China. (Sharpe, 2002) 200

[5] Jacques Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilisation.* 690 692

[6] Frank Ching, Ancestors: 900 Years in the Life of a Chinese Family. (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1974) 78

[7] Jacques Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilisation.* 693-703

[8] Jacques Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilisation.*155

[9] Stephen Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*. (Berkeley: University of California, 1997) 14

[10]Jacques Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilisation.* 155

[11]de Crespigny, Rafe (2004), *Generals of the South: The foundation and early history of the Three Kingdoms state of Wu*, Canberra: Australian National University.

[12] Chen Shou. *Sanguo Zhi* 三国志*Records of Three Kingdoms*, Volume 6, Biographies of Dong, the two Yuans, and Liu.

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[15] Shou Chen (c. 280), *Sanguo zhi (History of the Three Kingdoms)*, Reprint,1959. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju